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ABSTRACT

This article proposes two general instructional strategies that a course designer or materials writer may use to create a second language course that makes new demands on learners, yet contains feasible learning tasks. First, course designers can manipulate task components believed to determine task difficulty, components such as input text, the complexity of operations to be carried out on the input, and the nature of the output required. The second instructional strategy takes advantage of learning factors, ways in which preceding tasks in a sequence enable learners to successfully carry out later ones. The second strategy is implemented through the design of task sequences. Three task sequence models are examined, and the learning factors which appear to be exploited in each are identified. Collectively, these factors include: (1) task modification to learners' existing capacities; (2) repeated practice of task elements across tasks; (3) practice of new task elements within familiar tasks; (4) repeated practice of tasks in ascending order of difficulty; (5) focused practice of components of an ongoing macro-task; and (6) pre-learning of task elements followed by practice of them within macro-tasks. (MDM)

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RESPONDING TO TASK DIFFICULTY: WHAT IS INVOLVED IN ADJUSTING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNERS AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES?

John Honeyfield

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RESPONDING TO TASK DIFFICULTY: WHAT IS INVOLVED IN ADJUSTING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNERS AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES?

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Introduction

In this article I assume that a materials writer needs to create a learner-friendly course in which any task is feasible for the learners at that point in the course when they meet it. Tasks need to make new demands on learners, yet learning can only take place through learners engaging in tasks that are feasible. Task is used here in a broad sense to refer to any activity, exercise, or planned learning experience for the classroom.

The article suggests there are two general instructional strategies which a course designer or materials writer may use in creating a course that meets the feasibility requirement. First, when designing individual tasks, the course designer can manipulate task components believed to determine task difficulty, components such as the input text, the complexity of operations to be carried out on the input, and the nature of the output required. This might be called task modification, or task adaptation. To implement this strategy, a course designer must have an understanding - intuitive or systematic - of how various factors inter-relate to make a task more or less challenging for a group of learners. Two important types of factors, learner factors which derive from the learners, and task factors which derive from the nature of tasks, are discussed in the body of the article.

The second instructional strategy takes advantage of what I call learning factors, ways in which preceding tasks in a sequence enable learners to successfully carry out later ones. Thus a task which, in isolation, would be too demanding for learners, may be made feasible for them by arranging for prior learning that will have an enabling or facilitating function in relation to this task. The present article gives more attention to the second strategy, as it is less well known.

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The second strategy is implemented through the design of task sequences. The article suggests that course designers have developed a number of patterns or models of task sequence. Some important task sequence models are described, and the article speculates about the learning factors that may be involved in them.

Learner and Task Factors

As mentioned in the introduction, learner and task factors are seen as two of the main factor types contributing to task difficulty. Learner factors are features of learners which make it more or less difficult for them to carry out tasks, and derive mainly from previous learning. Task factors relate to particular tasks or task types, and make them more or less challenging for learners.

Nunan (1988; 1989: chapter 5) offers a detailed discussion of factors influencing task difficulty, and the list of factors presented below owes a good deal to his discussion. However, unlike Nunan I believe learner and task factors are essentially reciprocal. For example, tasks may differ in respect of the amount of confidence they require of learners, but learners also differ in the degree of confidence they have in carrying out a particular task. Giving a talk to the class, say, probably requires more confidence than a reading comprehension task, yet some learners will be more confident than others in giving the talk. Thus confidence can be considered both a task and a learner factor.

Again, learners may differ in their motivation towards a task type (a learner factor). But it can be argued that some task types are more motivating than others (cf. Ur 1988), or that the more demanding a task, the more motivation it requires; this makes motivation seem a task factor.

Indeed, it seems that almost any relevant factor will have the reciprocal quality we have just seen as a feature of confidence and motivation. If so, it may be simpler for the course designer to work with a unitary list, such as the following:

Learner/task Factors

1. Procedure, or what the learners have to do to derive output from input.

2. Input text)
)-
3. Output required)

Note: The following items, (a)-(d), may need considering for both input and output.

(a). Language items - vocabulary, structures, discourse structures, etc., processability.

(b). Skills, both macro- and sub-skills.

(c). World knowledge or "topic content".

(d). Text handling or conversation strategies.

4. Amount and types of help given.

5. Roles of teacher and learners.

6. Time allowed.

7. Motivation.

8. Confidence.

9. Learning styles.

However, each item must still be taken as having dual reference; relevant aspects of both learners and tasks should always be considered (if known).

To illustrate application of the above list, I now offer an interpretation of it as applied to tasks in which the main emphasis is on reading skills.

Learner/task Factors: An Interpretation for Reading Tasks

1. Procedure In what ways will learners need to process the text? How much information must they get, and how much of the text must be processed to get it? What depth of processing is required - eg, to what extent is inference involved? Is some critical or aesthetic response asked for? How effective are the learners likely to be in carrying out the procedure?

2. Language items What vocabulary, grammatical structures, forms of cohesion, and discourse patterns are involved? To what extent do learners need to know them (in view of the procedural requirements)? To what extent do they know them?

2a. Skills What reading sub-skills are required in this task? (Major sub-skills are skimming, scanning, and close reading.) To what extent have learners acquired them?

2b. World knowledge What world knowledge (content schemata) is required for processing this text? To what extent do learners have this knowledge? Will it be activated by the task? Can the learners themselves take the initiative, and reflect on relevant areas of their world knowledge?

2c. Text handling strategies What text handling strategies are needed for the tasks? What strategies would be useful to offset any deficiencies in, say, vocabulary or world knowledge? Examples are guessing unknown words from context, ignoring unknown words, and using a dictionary. To what extent do learners have the strategies, and know when to use them?

3. Output What form of output is required? To what extent can the learners cope with this? Quantity of output may be important, eg one-word answers vs. sentences, and whether or not output can be taken directly from the input.

4. Help given What help is given? Can learners use it? In the case of a reading task, help could involve text features such as redundancy, in-text definitions, and graphic support from diagrams, etc. (Help in the form of pre-reading tasks is covered below under learning factors.)

5. Roles of teacher and learners To what extent does the task give learners a choice of input texts, procedure or output? Can learners respond by adapting the task to their preferred ways of learning? By greater personal involvement?

6. Time How much time seems reasonable for this reading task? Can learners manage it within this time?

7. Motivation How motivating or interesting is the input? The procedure? Is the output needed for a following task, and will this be an incentive? Are these learners likely to find the task interesting?

8. Confidence is unlikely to be as important in reading as in speaking or writing, but may be relevant for tasks perceived as new or difficult. How much confidence does the task require? Will the learners have sufficient confidence?

9. Learning styles With what learning styles (Willing, 1988) is the task consistent? Do these match the learning styles of the learners?

The First Instructional Strategy: Adapting Tasks to the Capacities of Learners

Tasks may be adapted to the capacities of learners by manipulating task factors, the aim being feasibility. At the same time, tasks should set a reasonable challenge, often making new demands on learners (consistent with feasibility). Obviously a task may be easy for one group of learners and difficult for others, depending largely on past learning. This implies that learner factors should guide task adaptation.

In practice, tasks are not designed in isolation, but as elements of task sequences such as lessons or units. A course designer assumes that when learners reach a particular task, they will have worked through preceding tasks. Thus while needs analysis can determine relevant learner factors on entry to a course, the course designer must continually re-estimate learner factors indirectly by keeping in mind the task sequence preceding the task currently being designed. And thus sequence design influences task design; the two instructional strategies are not entirely independent.

It is likely that trade-off relationships are exploited in task design. For example, the length of input material could be held constant or reduced when new processing demands are made. On the other hand, we might set learners a more challenging version of a task type if we know they are highly motivated by the task type.

The Second Instructional Strategy: Enabling Learners to Cope with Tasks through Task Sequence Building

As I noted in the introduction, methodologists have developed a number of patterns or models of task sequence which can be seen as ways of implementing the second strategy. I will shortly describe and discuss some task sequence models (TSMs) for which there is evidence in the literature. It is not possible, on the basis of such analysis, to show the TSMs under discussion do indeed have an enabling function with respect to complex tasks. However, I believe these models have evolved or been developed as attempts to implement the second strategy, and what I want to do is to speculate about how each of them might do this - bearing in mind that ultimately, questions of their relative effectiveness could be answered only by empirical investigation.

I suggest the various TSMs are based (at least in part) on learning factors, ways in which the ease or difficulty of a task can be affected by other tasks preceding it. Such factors would develop in learners a capacity to carry out language-using tasks they otherwise could not have tackled, or help them carry out tasks more skillfully and effectively. The discussion, then, will aim to identify possible learning factors, but to do this we need to examine the structure of the TSMs, and in particular, inter-task relationships, continuities and discontinuities across tasks in a sequence. What is varied and what held constant in a TSM?

The Relevance of Integration to the Analysis of TSMs

Integration has been discussed in the literature, but rarely defined. It is most familiar as part of "skills integration", a common version of which proposes tasks in a sequence should each emphasize different macro-skills (eg, listening, writing), the tasks being linked by something in common, such as a grammatical structure or topic (Read, 1985). It seems to me that the integration here consists in continuity across tasks, the integrating device being a particular grammatical structure or topic. The items integrated are tasks. The proposal of Read (and others before Read) is that each task should focus on a different macro-skill - but this is not essential to the concept of integration as such.

Thus on my definition, integration is achieved when tasks in a sequence have anything significant in common which provides a link or connection between them. It can take many forms, some of which will be listed shortly.

Since integration consists of links or continuities across tasks, identifying patterns of integration is one conceptual tool for the analysis of task sequence models. We should bear in mind, however, that discontinuities are also relevant to an understanding of these models.

The following integration types can be found in recent language teaching materials and all occur, or may occur, in at least one of the TSMs to be discussed. (Models are partly defined by the integration types involved in them, though some integration types may be optional in a given TSM.) In item repetition integration, one or more lexical items, grammatical structures, sub-skills, discourse structures, etc., occur in two or more tasks in a sequence. This is probably the most basic kind of integration, and some form(s) of it tend to occur in all other kinds of integration.

There is task-type integration where a particular type of task is repeated, eg there may be several role-plays or information transfer tasks in a unit, presented either contiguously or separately. In real-life integration, tasks are linked by the fact that a sequence parallels some real-life macro-process of language use, eg a job application letter followed by an interview. The output from one task may become input for a following task, and here there is output-input integration, eg learners could fill in a questionnaire by interviewing classmates, then use the questionnaire data for a writing or speaking task.

Tasks may also be linked by a single topic (in their input and/or output texts) giving topic integration. Finally, part-whole integration occurs where tasks can be seen as linked by the fact that they all contribute to or form part of a larger whole - not merely a task sequence as such, but a more complex task, perhaps a communicative task involving writing or speaking.

The Task Sequence Models

Three TSMs will be discussed. They are shown schematically in Figure 1 below. In each case the discussion will present some evidence to show that the models exist in the methodological literature and/or in published materials, attempt to analyse the internal structure of the models, focusing on continuities and discontinuities, and try to uncover possible learning factors that may be involved.

(i). Repetition of Task Type with Increase in Complexity

I suspect that a "pure" form of this TSM ([i] in Figure 1) is quite rare in recent published materials, though it occurs in some older course books, eg ones consisting merely of a series of passages for comprehension, each followed by questions. (The model is present if, say, the passages increase in length and/or the questions in complexity.) However, it is not uncommon to find a task type repeated at intervals through a course, with increasing complexity, but with instances of it separated by tasks of other types. In such cases it would appear that type (i) is combined with one or more other TSMs.

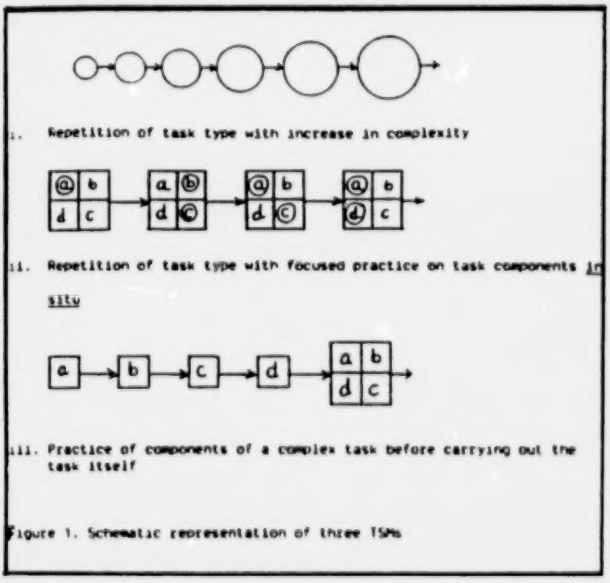
i. Repetition of task type with increase in complexity
ii. Repetition of task type with focused practice on task components in situ
iii. Practice of components of a complex task before carrying out the task itself

Figure 1. Schematic representation of three TSMs

Although this model can be implemented using real-life task types, it is questionable whether the model itself derives from processes of language use (as does model [ii], see below. It is true, as Prabhu (1987) points out, that communicative event types get repeated in real life; examples are lectures and service encounters. Yet these are not likely to be arranged in graded sequences. Rather, the model seems to derive from some implicit learning theory emphasizing repeated practice of tasks in such a way that a task always occurs as a recognisable instance of its type - but with manipulation of elements to ensure controlled increase in processing demands.

The task-type integration in this model will involve repetition of procedural elements (eg, filling in blanks if the task type is cloze), sub-skill configurations and, at least in the case of real-life tasks, text type. Writing a letter or listening to lectures must involve letters and lectures in some form, even if length or information density are varied.

(ii). **Repetition of a Task Type with Focus on Task Components In Situ**

This TSM ([ii] in Figure 1) seems limited largely to writing instruction as informed by the "process approach". To understand it we need to see the act of writing (in the broadest sense) as a macro-task; examples of writing macro-tasks are writing a story, writing a report, writing about an experience.

Research into the writing process has shown that a writing macro-task consists of various phases, such as pre-writing/planning, composing, revising, and editing. Moreover, a competent writer moves back and forth between these phases in a recursive manner as the need arises (Zamel 1983; 1987).

This TSM is much influenced by such study of the writing process, a process of language use, and by comparisons of the writing processes of proficient and less proficient writers (Zamel 1983). Essentially it involves focusing on different phases of the process (generating ideas, revising, etc.) to help learners become more aware of, and more proficient in these phases, and thus more proficient in the process as a whole (Lapp 1985; Raimes 1983).

It is important to note that focused practice of the different aspects of writing is characteristically given "in context", ie within the context of an ongoing writing macro-task. The course designer or teacher intervenes in some way, either by having "conferences" with individuals or groups who need help, or through a more formal approach, by setting planning, revision or feedback tasks for the whole class at points thought to be appropriate. (Some process writing books are rather rigid. In a book by Cramer [1985] each unit follows the same plan, with focused work on each phase of writing in the same order for each writing project. This seems to allow little scope for recursiveness.)

The intervention in an ongoing process involved in process writing distinguishes this TSM from others (and presumably could not easily be implemented with other macro-skills such as conversation or listening). The approach emphasizes practice, so the macro-task gets repeated. There is part-whole

integration, topic integration, output-input integration and item repetition between the phases of a given writing macro-task.

(iii). Practice of Components of a Complex Task before the Task Itself is Carried Out

In diagram (iii). Figure 1, the final square represents a complex task regarded as too difficult for learners to tackle directly. In this TSM, such a complex, probably communicative task becomes the end point of a sequence. The task is analysed and, based on the analysis, a series of pre-tasks is created to practise components before learners tackle the final task itself. The final task probably represents a major goal of the course, eg conversation, lecture comprehension, or writing a certain text type.

Study writing (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 1987) is an example of a course book implementing this TSM. At the end of chapter 1, dealing with spatial relationships, we find "consolidation tasks" requiring the learner to write descriptions of a living room, or of the layout of university car parks. These more or less communicative tasks are preceded by 11 pre-tasks focusing on discourse patterns, vocabulary, and other linguistic information relevant to writing descriptions of spatial relationships. The TSM of this book thus does not reflect research into the writing process, but rather is based on the authors' study of written texts using discourse analysis, on writing as product.

It seems to me analysis of language as product is a basic principle of TSM (iii), and if analysis shifts to processes of language use, the outcome will be a sequence conforming to model (ii) (or perhaps a hybrid of [ii] and [iii]). However, model (iii) also presumably reflects belief in a synthetic approach to learning according to which components of a task can be learned outside the task, then somehow combined in the task as a whole. Grading of the pre-tasks may be possible, but the model seems to involve a sudden increase in effort at the end of a sequence, when learners have to synthesise past learning. Item repetition may integrate the model (eg two discourse structures integrate unit 1 in Study writing); part-whole integration links pre-tasks to final task(s), yet there is some discontinuity as pre-tasks shift focus from, say, vocabulary to discourse.

An account of course design in Nunan (1989:17) seems to imply support for model (iii), but his later discussion of sequencing in the same book does not promote a particular model. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: chapter 10) advocate a similar model, but one complicated by an initial phase in which an input text

introduces topic content (and perhaps a discourse schema). Semi-official curriculum guidelines in Australia also favour model (iii) (eg Carr et al., 1989).

Models (ii) and (iii) in Pre-reading/Reading Sequences

Sequences in which pre-reading tasks precede reading may reflect either model (ii) or (iii). Tudor's (1990) survey of pre-reading task types in ELT textbooks distinguishes between tasks which do and do not involve access to the final passage. Where a pre-reading task involves some (limited) access to the final passage, the pre-reading/reading sequence arguably parallels the reading processes of skilled readers (or at least options open to skilled readers). A skilled reader might, for example, preview a text by looking at topic sentences and graphic items, thus getting an overview of content and discourse structure before a more detailed reading of the text.

Tudor describes pre-reading tasks in which learners predict "content, structures, or development of the target text on the basis of a partial sampling of [the target text itself]. This can relate to...the title, sub-headings or illustrations, or may involve a skim read of the text as a whole" (1990:328). Thus the relationship between these pre-reading tasks and subsequent reading tasks seems to parallel a real-life process of language use, and so the TSM involved appears to be (iii).

Other pre-reading tasks do not have this kind of relationship with subsequent reading. In one pre-reading task described by Tudor, learners are given an outline of the passage, plus a list of words; they have to predict which words will occur in the passage (without seeing the passage itself). Although this task might be useful, it cannot reflect the normal reading process, since a reader would not normally have access to such outlines and word lists. Rather, it reflects the course designer's analysis of the passage as understood by her - i.e analysis of the "product" of reading. Thus the TSM linking this task to subsequent reading appears to be (iii).

Conclusion

The article presented an account of two instructional strategies. The first is task adaptation to bring classroom tasks into line with learners' existing capacities, and depends on an understanding of learner and task factors. The second strategy is task sequence building to extend learners' capacities; the aim of sequence building is to facilitate performance of complex tasks which otherwise learners either could not attempt, or could not carry out satisfactorily. The article looked at three models

of task sequence and, through examining the structure of these models, tried to identify the learning factors which appear to be exploited in them to facilitate learning. The article also suggested that the models emphasize different aspects of language, and that different theories of learning may be implicit in them.

It remains now to try and state explicitly the learning factors that seem to be involved in the TSMs discussed. I suggest the following list:

a. practice of tasks modified to bring them close to learners' existing capacities;

b. repeated practice of task elements across tasks (whether tasks of the same type or different types);

c. practice of a new task element, or a more demanding form of a familiar element, within a task of a familiar type;

d. repeated practice of instances of a task type arranged in ascending difficulty order through grading;

e. focused practice of components at suitable points within an ongoing macro-task;

f. pre-learning of task elements followed by practice of them within macro-task contexts.

Although (a) is closely associated with the first strategy, it can also be seen as involved in sequence building, since a sequence consists of individual tasks.

Making such factors explicit may allow for empirical investigation of the extent to which they actually enhance learning.

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